

Back pain in the workplace.

Causes of pain

Back pain can be caused by many work situations. The exact cause is often unclear, but back pain is more common in roles that involve:

- heavy manual labour, and handling tasks in heavy industry;
- manual handling in awkward places, like delivery work;
- repetitive tasks, such as manual packing of goods;
- sitting at a workstation for a long period of time if the workstation is not correctly arranged or adjusted to fit the person, eg working with computers;
- driving long distances or driving over rough ground, particularly if the seat is not, or cannot be, properly adjusted or adequately sprung.
- operating heavy equipment, such as an excavator,
- stooping, bending over or crouching (poor posture);
- pushing, pulling or dragging loads that require excessive force;
- working beyond normal abilities and limits, and when physically overtired;
- stretching, twisting and reaching;

Consult your workers

- You have a legal duty to consult with all your employees or their elected representatives.
- Talking to your staff is good because they know what they find difficult and often have good ideas about how to improve things. Involving workers and safety representatives in discussions about how to improve health and safety will also make it easier to agree changes and workers will be more likely to follow procedures that they have helped to design.
- Some people are more susceptible to back pain than others, so it is important to consult employees in the risk assessment process.

What can I do to help protect workers?

The physical demands of some tasks like manual handling, lifting, bending and driving heavy vehicles can trigger an episode or make an existing back pain worse.

Take steps to reduce the risk of back pain in the workplace.

You could:

- Think about how you can make jobs physically easier, e.g. by moving loads on wheels, providing better handles on loads, adjusting heights of worktops etc.
- Consult regularly with the employees on their health and well being to help you identify concerns and developing trends.
- Take actions to address any outcomes from these discussions.
- Respond promptly when an individual worker reports back pain
- Do risk assessments – and make changes where needed.

Visit the web pages for your industry for advice on work place risks specific to your industry.

Helping workers.

Back pain advice for employers

- Record and analyse sickness absence
- Consider a contract with an occupational health provider or in-house occupational health professionals

Record and analyse sickness absence

Find out to what extent workers are reporting back pain symptoms and how much sickness absence is due to back problems. You may need to look at how you record and monitor sickness absence. This information will show whether you need to address further preventative measures.

Patterns may emerge that identify difficulties with specific jobs. You should review your risk assessments if this is the case.

Using an occupational health provider

If you are concerned because significant numbers of your workers are affected by back problems, or lengthy/multiple spells of sickness absence due to back pain, you could develop schemes to tackle this, such as early access to advice or help in returning to work.

Benefits of using schemes can include:

- reducing the worker's pain and difficulty;
- reducing the time it takes for a worker to recover and return to work;
- improved productivity and reduced costs of absence.

There is also evidence that benefits of providing early access to advice, extra help where appropriate and managing return to work outweigh the costs, when return to work from back pain is approached in a structured way..

Causes of back pain.

Back pain is more common in tasks that involve:

- lifting heavy or bulky loads;
- carrying loads awkwardly, possibly one handed;
- repetitive tasks, packing of products;
- long distance driving or driving over rough ground, particularly if the seat is not, or cannot be, properly adjusted;
- stooping, bending or crouching, including work at PCs (poor posture);
- pushing, pulling or dragging heavy loads;
- working beyond normal abilities and limits;
- working when physically tired;
- stretching, twisting and reaching;
- prolonged periods in one position.

Warning signs

If you have severe pain which gets worse over several weeks, or if you are unwell with back pain, you should see your doctor.

Back pain is not usually due to any serious damage or disease. The pain usually improves within days or a few weeks, at least enough to get on with your life. Only a few people have back pain that is caused by a more serious issue such as a slipped disc or a trapped nerve and even these usually get better by themselves.

X-rays and MRI scans can detect serious spinal injuries which are very rare but they don't usually help in ordinary back pain.

If you do have back pain and suddenly notice any of these symptoms, which are rare, you should see a doctor straight away:

- difficulty passing or controlling urine
- numbness around your back passage or genitals
- numbness, pins and needles, or weakness in both legs
- unsteadiness on your feet